Professional Learning Communities: Building Blocks for School Culture and Student Learning

Milbrey W. McLaughlin and
Joan E. Talbert

Professional learning communities that center on students, use data effectively, distribute expertise, and enjoy district-level leadership and investment are proving to have a powerful impact on school culture, instructional quality, and student outcomes.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have gained increasing attention from researchers over the last twenty years or so and have been present in schools for even longer. While in the past, they were often seen as a "boutique" exercise rather than part of a larger reform, PLCs are gaining increasing traction and notice in various settings and in a number of school districts as a way of improving teaching quality and student achievement.

Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert have been studying professional learning communities together and separately for many years. Their most recent joint book on the subject is *Building School-Based Teacher Learning Communities* (McLaughlin & Talbert 2006). They spoke with *VUE* guest editor Marla Ucelli-Kashyap about the evolution of and evidence about PLCs.

Milbrey W. McLaughlin is professor emerita of education and public policy, founding director of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Families, and co-director of the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching at Stanford University. Joan E. Talbert is senior research scholar and co-director of the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching at Stanford.

What is an effective professional learning community? What are their characteristics and what do you think of the state of evidence that they can really make a difference for student outcomes?

JOAN TALBERT: You can use all sorts of different language around this — community of practice, collaborative practice, PLC — but it is a group of individuals who share a goal and work together to achieve the goal, assess their progress, make corrections, and hold themselves accountable for achieving their common goal. Typically, people think of *teachers* in learning communities. But [PLCs] can be principals across schools in a district. Central office can function as a professional learning community. And, of course, [PLCs can be] teachers in grade-level teams in elementary schools — or in high school subject departments, or cross-discipline teams working with the same set of students. Such groups are PLCs to the extent that they are doing joint work together and have norms of collaboration and mutual accountability.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I would add to that: very clear norms of openness and candor and learning from failure, so the cultural shift is actually quite profound for educators. Learning communities also are characterized by a lot of information and data in doing joint work that is supported by an internal system of accountability. I think one of the things that struck us in looking at

PLCs across a number of initiatives is there is a point where the accountability for student outcomes is pulled into the community – as opposed to having someone doing it to you. So, even in a high-stakes accountability context, we find that internal sense of professional responsibility.

The Impact of Professional Learning Communities on Student Achievement

When you looked at professional learning communities that had the kind of norms that you have just been talking about and the ability to learn from failure, what is their impact?

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: Well, Joan, you are sitting on a pile of data right now.

JOAN TALBERT: Yes. The most up-close kind of evidence that we see all the time is that a group of teachers is looking closely at their students' learning outcomes and skill gaps and figuring out ways to work together to address the gaps and come back and see how the students did. Key is design-

ing an intervention for addressing the student learning needs – then assessing the results and then coming back and either trying something new or moving on. So, to document outcomes of the PLC you can look at data the teachers develop to assess the students' learning of the particular things that they have attended to.

In addition, we and others have done correlational analyses where we look across teacher groups or across schools at the extent of "PLCness" to see if that predicts gains in student achievement. We found, repeatedly, strong effects of teacher collaboration on gains in student learning at the school level and in smaller groups. A group called Pearson Achievement Solutions has been doing a fairly extensive analysis of student outcomes related to their model of developing grade-level learning teams.[1] They have some pretty impressive evidence of student learning gains in a kind of interrupted time series analysis. You can see the shift in the growth of student achievement after the learning team-work begins and in relation to comparison schools within the district as a whole. I think evidence is beginning to accumulate of strong student outcomes – but the problem of developing the PLCs is the challenge.

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1 William Saunders of Pearson, Claude Goldenberg of Stanford, and Ronald Gallimore of UCLA (2009) studied grade-level teaming efforts in a large urban school district in southern California where teachers had been provided explicit teaming protocols in school-based training. They found the experimental schools exhibited greater student achievement growth on state-mandated tests over three years than comparison schools in the same district.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: Wouldn't you also say that where the student effects are most evident is at the bottom of the distribution, since a lot of these communities spend their time working around questions of student failure or poor achievement? I am thinking of the SAM [Scaffolded Apprenticeship Model]/New Visions schools in New York City.

JOAN TALBERT: Yes, [there is an] increase of students being on track that we have been seeing among schools doing a particular kind of PLC initiative we have been evaluating in New York City. The veteran schools in SAM have a significantly better rate of bringing students from being off track to being on track to graduate compared to schools that have not been involved with SAM.[2]

Are there any fine points, in terms of implementation or results, around the effectiveness of professional learning communities in changing school culture and teaching practices that are related to particular characteristics, like grade level or racial and ethnic composition of the teaching staff?

JOAN TALBERT: There is not really hard evidence on composition. One thing that we've argued and I think we have evidence to support – though it's not published at this point – is that there

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2 SAM is a program co-developed by the Baruch College School of Public Affairs and New Visions for Public Schools in New York City that integrates a university-based, degree-granting leadership development program with school reform via school-based inquiry teams. The Center for Research on the Context of Teaching at Stanford is the evaluator the SAM program. For more information and data about the impact of SAM on off-track and on-track graduation rates, see Talbert et al. 2009.

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has to be some sort of critical mass of experienced, skilled teachers in the group. Maybe it is only one out of three teachers or something like that ratio in a larger group who have strong instructional skills.

We often find, in the poorest schools with high teacher turnover and where grade-level teams are organized to try and bring people together for planning time, that brand-new teachers forming a team are struggling with rudiments of instruction. And they just don't have the knowledge resources amongst them to effectively collaborate to improve student achievement. So this is a question of whether the group has sufficient teacher experience and expertise to learn together and make good decisions about interventions to improve student learning.

> An important role for district administrators is modeling the norm of learning from failure.

Shifting Attention from the Subject Matter to the Student

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: Right. You don't want a whole bunch of newbies. And one of the things that we stressed in our book is that this is a district-level responsibility.[3] Make sure that — almost like a starter yeast — capacity exists in the school to support a teacher learning community, versus the dance of the lemons and/or assigning new teachers to some of the most difficult schools.

The other thing, and this is what I think is so exciting about the New Visions/SAM work, is that high schools are often difficult simply because teachers tend to be subject centered and not student centered. That is kind of a broad generalization, but some of the cross-discipline or cross-subject collaboration we've seen is just so exciting: people discovering that the same student who is having trouble in English is also having trouble in science or in mathematics and teachers really coming together to see that individual not just through the lenses of the subject matter.

JOAN TALBERT: Yeah, that is really a good point. I think the SAM design is particularly well suited to shifting teachers' attention from their own

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3 See McLaughlin and Talbert 2006.

instruction in the content area to student learning and then working to figure out what are the high-leverage interventions or responses that they should make as a team or as a school to address a learning gap among struggling students.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I am sure all of us remember this famous expression, though I don't even know where it came from: "I'm teaching and you're not learning." High school teachers are particularly susceptible to that. Some of the focus groups we've conducted with teacher teams where a learning community exists across disciplines have been so exciting — listening to them put subject matter aside and really focusing on individual learners.

District-Level Responsibility

What is the responsibility of districts in making professional learning communities possible and successful? How can districts reconcile what you mandate to support professional learning communities and what you allow to flourish on its own?

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I am not sure I have a direct answer to your question, but in the things we have learned about districts, for sure, is that the equity issue is so important. I have this debate with my students who come from charter schools when they say, why do we need districts? There really are system responsibilities in that context. The one thing we've seen across a

number of initiatives is the important role the district plays in terms of data generation and use. We need some district support for the curriculum for the teacher learning community and that capacity just doesn't exist in most schools. So New Visions has one way of doing it, other districts have other ways of doing it. In San Jose, California, in particular, there is a critical district role.

Another important role for district administrators is modeling the norm of learning from failure. Tony Alvarado is always so articulate about this and being candid about successes and disappointments. It needs to come from the top. Similarly, the roles of principals are key. We've seen really vital professional learning communities just completely evaporate with the change of the principal, who didn't share the importance of collectivity and, rather, wanted to go back to a more command and control style of leadership. So that taught us that even some of the strong teacher communities can still be very fragile in system terms.

JOAN TALBERT: Just given the accountability pressures these days on schools, districts can do a lot to squelch the development of collaboration. And we've seen that, of course, over and over again. But the idea of fidelity in sticking to the curriculum, doing pacing guides, keeping the pace of the curriculum, is really not conducive to teacher collaboration and problem solving. It puts all the pressure on implementation of curriculum and, to the extent districts feel that that is the way to go, they can undermine professional learning communities.

Your question is really what has to happen at the top. I think one answer is to keep everyone focused on developing PLCs and collaborative responsibilities so as not to bring a whole bunch

Teacher Collaboration
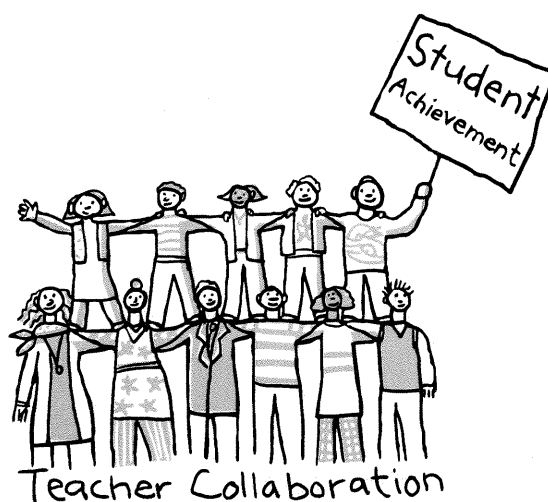
of other reform initiatives in and pull teachers' time away from work together.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: That is important. It really needs to be a top priority.

The Impact of Federal Policy on Teacher Collaboration

Currently, federal policies and resources are driving a lot of things states and districts are doing, through emphasizing teaching quality and measurement of individual teacher performance, along with a strong focus on school accountability and some dramatic strategies to turn around failing schools. Is there some cause for concern about the survival of a collaborative strategy that is focused on instructional improvement, with all those other pressures around it?

JOAN TALBERT: I think the Race to the Top emphasis on linking individual teacher quality to student outcomes is potentially a really serious risk, because it can force teachers into a competitive stance with colleagues and discourage knowledge sharing and collaboration. I don't know if you saw the *Education Week* piece that Kim Marshall did on merit pay.[4] I think that was an excellent statement of exactly how that comes up against the collaborative PLC work.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: And most of that learning from failure is really central. That's why we think there is built-in tension, as Joan was saying, with a lot of the Race to the Top and the high-stakes accountability stuff.

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4 See Marshall 2009.

Imagine you are sitting right now talking to a superintendent of a pressured urban school district that is teetering on the edge of the next level of corrective action. What would you say to convince him or her that investing in a capacity building strategy that takes a while to take root is going to have some payoff for them? Would you make that argument at all?

JOAN TALBERT: I would. I am convinced. I may have mentioned the Sanger school district in California's Central Valley that has really devoted itself to developing PLCs across all district schools for about the last five years.[5] They have had tremendous gains in student achievement across all their thirteen K–12 schools and have brought all schools and the district out of program improvement (PI) status.

It is astonishing to see what a real focus on that kind of development of collective responsibility, data use, and collaboration to improve student learning can do. They have a core instructional program and general design for interventions, but are focused on developing PLCs and not bringing in other things that might derail or distract from the effort. There isn't any short-term fix that could be an alternative to this kind of long-term capacity building.

The Importance of Data

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I would make the same argument and add the important role that data plays, along with the district responsibility for this. I am thinking in particular of San Jose, where the whole district is in program improvement. Several years ago, when they were under a desegregation order,

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5 See DuFour et al. 2010 and the Sanger Unified School District Web site at <www.sanger.k12.ca.us>.

Superintendent Linda Murray made the choice to respond to that by disaggregating data throughout the district. Data for every individual teacher and every kid and, for each kid, the particular standards or assessments of standards are completely public, both inside and outside the school. So, for example, you would know if a kid was having an issue with reading – you would know whether it was comprehension or whatever.

So, that level of data is a huge part of professional learning communities in that district, and they have data that shows certainly not gap closings but incredible growth of the English language learner community in San Jose. And the district would lay that squarely on teacher learning communities – professionals working together. The district targets professional development based on some of the data on particular schools. It is really one of the strongest district data systems I have seen.[6] This is a grain-size issue. It is one thing to say 10 percent of your students are failing in whatever, but you need to get down inside of standards and see where teaching is falling short.

PLCs: Structural Change Versus Fad

What are the differences in policy, practice, and knowledge that are driving what seems to be more of a focus on professional learning communities now than was the case twenty years ago?

JOAN TALBERT: It is really interesting. I think it takes a long time for those ideas that are a nontraditional way of
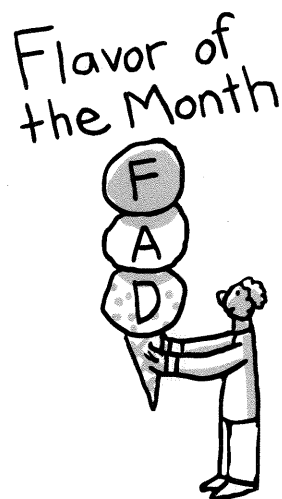
thinking about improvement to catch hold. It's not a program, it's not professional development around content specifically, it's not the "quick fix" kind of strategy that has been used over many, many years. I think it is turning a very, very large ship rather than making a quick change in one direction. There is so much talk about fads in education, but I don't think this is a faddish kind of change. It has taken a very long time for people in key positions to make investments in this. The National Staff Development Council has explicitly called for organizing adults into learning communities in their professional development standards documents since 2005. So I think it has only been in the last very small number of years that any school districts have taken this on.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I think that is right, and I would add that there are some real caveats here. The downside of what you just described, Marla and Joan, is that it is the new flavor of the month and the new good solution.

Flavor of the Month

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6 For example, see the district's annual school climate surveys at <www.sjusd.org/school/district/info/C140>; Education Trust–West 2010; and District Administration Custom Publishing Group 2008.

We have seen projects start professional learning communities totally not understanding what kind of support they need. Or, [they] say it is the professional learning community that is going to implement what the students need to perform and we are going to give you what you need to do. There really needs to be a *learning* community. It will implement, but it is not an *implementing* community.
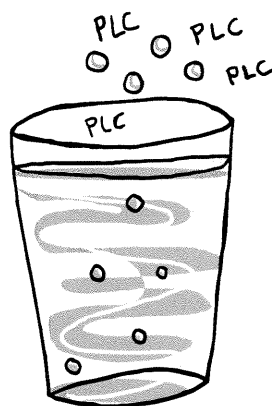
JOAN TALBERT: Also, we have seen in several districts now in the last several years an attempt to treat PLCs as a program to be implemented, or something you can just mandate and it will happen.

What about less-formalized efforts to create learning communities, either within or across schools, or things that just bubble up on their own?

JOAN TALBERT: Well, the National Writing Project is a wonderful example of interlocking one large network and lots of informal networks within it. Professional learning communities outside of schools are one of the things we found to be really key resources for learning communities within schools. It's not either-or. I think teachers who

are involved in those kinds of more or less bubbled-up professional networks outside of schools are knowledge carriers or brokers for inside the school's networks. I guess the one big difference is, if they don't have joint work, it's not precisely the way we would think of a PLC, but it's a professional community that learns together around other things. The joint work could be a study group, book study, or something.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I don't think we really have a lot like that example because of the joint work issue and also just the system and support for it – providing time and resources and such. I am trying to think of the ones I know that would fit your definition, Marla. They are issue specific and episodic and they go away – unlike the larger learning resources that Joan was talking about.

The Role of the Community in PLCs

Teacher collaboration toward improved school culture and student learning is a strategy that is closely linked to what we might call professional expertise. How can that also embrace collaboration with the community beyond the school? Milbrey, you also founded a center on youth and their communities. Are there roles for the community in supporting or being part of professional learning communities in schools?

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: That is a really fertile area, and it is one that has also been very difficult for people to get their arms around. I think some of the best examples are probably in New York City, but they involve community schools and, again, formalized relationships between in-school and out-of-

school resources. They also involve the opportunity for teachers and community members to have conversations about students or about the kinds of structures that support or get in the way of progress.

Leonard Covello [at Benjamin Franklin High School] had it right many years ago.[7] Those are the kinds of structures. We have some community schools here in California that are doing that, also. There are things called family resource centers and other kinds of non-school community resources that I think have made important progress in formalizing relationships with teachers – sometimes through an afterschool program but, again, a formal venue for conversations about student learning and experience within and outside the school.

It is really, really hard to do because some teachers say, "It's not my job," or, "What happens in the family resource center is not my job." But there are examples, especially within the community schools, where the two institutional settings are really having productive conversations. Joan, I'm also thinking of our Students at the Center experience[8] and the project that I thought had an amazing model for professional development. It involved the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia and several district schools. The project involved parents in teachers' professional development and they found an astonishing asset developing, in that high-poverty, African American parents became knowledgeable about the

curriculum and curriculum goals and were able to support it at home. The teachers were so cynical at first: "You are going to involve these parents in my Franklin Institute science class?" But they came to appreciate it as a resource for their own classroom activities and goals, because the parents understood what was going on in the classroom and supported it.

Building Capacity for Developing PLCs

What about the capacity to build professional learning communities? Can it be built in the district, or is there always a need for a relationship with an external support organization of some sort?

JOAN TALBERT: Good question. It varies and maybe should shift over time. For example, the Boston Plan for Excellence [BPE] has been filling the key role of providing facilitators to support development of school teams under a SAM initiative in the district. BPE now is working with Boston Public Schools to develop its own facilitator expertise

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7 See Johanek and Puckett 2007.

8 During the mid-1990s, Stanford's CRC documented professional development in Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York City under this five-year initiative funded by the DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund.

Time is a huge priority, so a sustained focus on PLCs is key, as is a commitment to developing distributed expertise and leadership for professional collaboration at all system levels.

to lead PLC development in all district schools. I think all our research and that of others who have been following PLC development point to the importance of having trained and skilled facilitators to help bring about the changes and sustain the work.

So, I would definitely say district capacity can be built. But that, actually, is one of the challenges of this. I think the partnerships between districts and intermediaries around these [PLC] initiatives have sometimes been rocky. How dependent the district might be on ongoing facilitation from outside partners versus how much the organization can actually develop the facilitating skills of teachers in schools is a real question. I think definitely that the leadership should be embedded in the district. But partly, that is building the middle system of the district.

Speaking of the organizational capacity to do this work at any kind of scale, what would be your advice to funders, district policy-makers, policy-makers at other levels, and reform support organizations about improving teaching quality by focusing on the collective work of teachers, particularly in our most challenged school settings? What should they put their resources and energy into?

JOAN TALBERT: I tend to think about the social-normative side, the technical side, and the organizational side. And we have to invest in all three of those. The social-normative side includes trust and support for risk-taking, leadership, and modeling the priorities of collaboration and data use. The technical side includes multiple measures of students' learning, common assessments linked to standards, and quick results turnaround. The organizational side includes common planning time, professional development for facilitators,

or partnering with external facilitators. Time is a huge priority, so a sustained focus on PLCs is key, as is a commitment to developing distributed expertise and leadership for professional collaboration at all system levels.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: Data, data, data – at a fine-grained size. The technical side includes the data and, also, protocols for PLC work could be really helpful – also, recognizing that the data that teachers need are not the same data that administrators might need. San Jose is a well-developed example of a place with a fairly differentiated understanding of data that are needed at different levels of the system. So teachers get one thing, principals get another kind of data, and central office yet another.

JOAN TALBERT: And a data system that can manage formative student assessment data in a very quick turnaround is key if teacher PLCs are to use it to continually improve instruction. So, what's happening in New York City is that schools are buying their own software so that teachers can enter the data and analyze it and get results within days. It requires technical investments at all system levels to get useful data.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: Yet again, clear district leadership. This goes back to really modeling from the top what it is like to use data.

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